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BENNY MURDANI'S PRESS CONFERENCE

Hotel Turismo, Dili, 11.30pm, Tuesday 10 October 1989

Q. Pak Benny, the reason we are all here is because of the Pope's visit. Can the Authorities assure security and control of the crowd?

A. If one of those jokers came down from the hills it would be a very unlucky occasion.

Q. The original estimates of the crowd to see the Pope at Tasi Tolu was 300,000 people. Now it is said that only 150,000 will attend. We hear also that many people are not going to attend because they feel that the visit is being used as a political tool for the integration of East Timor. Is the Pope's visit to East Timor being used by the Indonesian Government to further legitimise the integration of East Timor?

A. The Pope expressed a desire to visit Indonesia. He expressed a desire to visit several places including Dili. For that we are very happy. Now the population of East Timor is 595,000 people. Many of those are from other parts of Indonesia and are not Catholic so it would be difficult to achieve a crowd of 300,000.

Q. There have been reports from reliable sources that Timorese people coming to Dili from outlying areas to see the Pope have been harassed at military checkpoints and that their names are being recorded according to their Kebupaten. When the Pope visited Yogyakarta, there were no checkpoints. Does the situation here in East Timor require that you take such harsh measures?

A. There are some people running around in the hills who are very unreasonable and unpredictable.

Q. But we don't have so many problems in Java.

A. Here some people are more unreasonable. You western journalists are quick to point out that the situation in Timor is less than normal. But you never write about the situation in Northern Ireland where the English and Irish are killing each other. Yes, the situation in East Timor I must admit for various reasons, but remember the East Timorese had the Portuguese for 400 years. They have only had us for 15 years. Let us see after ten years what the people think. It is unfair to make a comparison as they are not used to Indonesian rule yet.

Q. Pak, you say that the East Timorese had Portuguese rule for 400 years and Indonesian rule for only 15 years. Does this mean that you are saying that like the Portuguese Indonesia is a foreign power?

A. In 1974, who was the Governor of East Timor? He was Portuguese. Who is the Governor now? He is Mario Carrascalao, a Timorese.

Q. But does the Governor run East Timor's economy or do the military. Reliable sources have it that the military has a disproportionate control of the economy.

A. That is a big surprise to me. You should check with the local authorities. I know nothing. The Government are the authority here not the military.

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Q. It would seem that after 14 years of Indonesian rule the Timorese people are still not content with Indonesian rule.

A. Indonesia entered Timor at the request of the interim government of the time. We had two options. We could have siad "Let the Timorese go it alone". But if they were to go it alone what would sustain them. Would you leave the people of East Timor to their fate? Look what happened to the people of Angola and Mozambique. If Timor had gone it alone they would have asked for support from Indonesia. Indonesia could not have afforded to support East Timor, so the Timorese would probably have turned to another country to the north which has long been interested in the Pacific.

Q. Pak, 14 years since integration, have all the lives lost, both the Indonesian soldiers and the Timorese people, and all the costs involved been worth it?

A. Yes, I think so. Had we not come in certainly someone else would have. It May now have been difficult to travel by sea from Java to Irian Jaya. There would be instability in the region.

Q. Can you give an estimate of the number of casualties suffered by the Indonesian military over the past 14 years?

A. If you count all those who died of malaria, motorbike accidents, etc, a few thousand I think but I really don't remember.

Q. It is said there are still 14,000 military personnel in East Timor. Yet you have said that there are only 200-500 Timorese people fighting against the Indonesian army. Why are there so many Indonesian military fighting here?

A. You have exaggerated the number of military here by 1000. There areonly 13,000 soldiers here. It is true that there are only 200 unreasonable people running around in the hills. But back in 1975 grenades, bullets and weapons went in all directions. The military presence is needed as a preventative measure. The military is also involved in its second function in many development projects, building schools, roads etc.

Q. Before integration there were only 50 Portuguese soldiers in East Timor. The Timorese were free to travel anywhere within Timor and also to other Portuguese colonies. Why is it so different now?

A. That is not true. The manager of this hotel said it was not possible for the servants to even go outside the hotel. And if you're talking about other former Portuguese colonies look at Mozambique. It is known as a bad government all over the world.

Q. Pak, could you give your reaction to Bishop Belo's comments concerning human rights abuses and the question of a referendum.

A. Don't tell Bishop/I said this but it seems that he doesn't know where to draw the line between where his responsibilities start and finish. I feel he should not talk about political matters. He is the head of the church here and should keep to ministering to his congregation. What right does he have as a priest to say that there should be a referendum? I think he knows more about the people of East Timor than I do because I don't live here but I think to call for a referendum is a bit much for a leader of the church. The people have already voted in two elections since integration They voted for either Golkar, the PDI or PPP. They did not vote for the Portuguese Socialist Party.

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Q. It was a bit hard to vote for the Portuguese Socialist Party, Pak, as they did not contest the election.

Q. Pak, the woman that was sitting at the end of the table when you arrived was the widow of Greg Shackleton, one of the 5 Australian journalists killed in Balibo in 1975. What would you say to her?

A. I have nothing to say to Shirley Shackleton. We didn't have our soldiers at Balibo. It was a war. It was dangerous. You can get killed.

Q. We have word that four separate witnesses declared that they were shot by Indonesian troops.

A. I cannot confirm that Indonesian troops were not in East Timor at the time. It was a rather murky situation at the time.

Q. What do you think of Australia's reaction to the events in East Timor in 1975?

A. We were surprised that Australia misunderstood this whole thing. Little difference was made by a statement made by a leader or a newspaper. People in Jakarta didn't differentiate with what Whitlam said and what members of the Trade Unions and East Timor Movements were saying.

Q. What do you think of the future for bilateral relations between Indonesia and Australia?

A. Let's put all these miserable events in the past behind us. I'd like to go to Australia but its up to the President.

Chris McMahon.